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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000529

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RAISES DEMOCRACY CONCERNS TO FOREIGN ADVISOR

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis; Reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary: Foreign Affairs Adviser Chowdhury and the Ambassador discussed USG concerns about Bangladesh's democracy, custodial deaths, Shoaib Choudhury's sedition trial, and continuing registration problems for American visitors to Bangladesh. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On March 28, the Ambassador and poloff (note taker) met for 45 minutes with Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Chowdhury. MFA Pacific Wing Director General Shahidul Islam also attended.

PROSPECTS FOR ELECTIONS

13. (C) The Ambassador reported that during her recent consultations in Washington she had heard growing concern about the future of democracy in Bangladesh. She noted that the ban on political activities and the erosion of due process protections, particularly in high-profile corruption cases, fuel the perception that democratic principles are under strain in Bangladesh. Several members of Congress, she added, have asked the Department to explain why FAA section 508 "democracy" sanctions should not be invoked against the GOB. She also reiterated our belief that a timeframe for elections was urgently required.

14. (C) Chowdhury replied that the GOB is in the serious business of governing, and has linked a number of its initiatives to international norms. He acknowledged the need for due process protections, but today's situation in Bangladesh is a "one chance in a thousand generations" to eliminate corruption and ensure elections are held without violence.

15. (C) The Chief Advisor, Chowdhury said, will make a statement next month that might include a timeframe for elections. He stressed, however, that the statement, perhaps in mid-April, would in no way mean the current government was a "lame duck." Chowdhury said that 12 to 15 months are needed to complete needed reforms and, at the same time, institute a national ID program, most likely implemented by the army. After a few months, politics could be restarted before progressing to elections. He said that strong local governance, "coupled with a grand compact with political parties, whose members would be thoroughly screened, would create the majority and the Prime Minister while the opposition would be permitted to chair some committees as part of the government."

¶6. (C) Asked if Awami League president Sheikh Hasina, now in the U.S., would be permitted to return to Bangladesh, Chowdhury said, "I don't know, but technically she is free to return. However, there will be completely new political actors for the next elections," he noted.

CUSTODIAL DEATHS, SHOAIB, AND TERRORISM

¶7. (C) When the Ambassador raised concerns over new incidents of custodial death, Chowdhury maintained that the GOB takes human rights seriously and will act to ensure they are respected. The Ambassador gave him an Embassy non-paper describing two high-profile custodial deaths and a NGO director who has been badly beaten in detention.

¶8. (C) Chowdhury also accepted the Ambassador's copy of House Resolution number 64 supporting Bangladeshi journalist Shoaib Choudhury, who now faces sedition charges in connection with his aborted travel to attend a partially USG-funded seminar in Israel. The Ambassador noted Congressional concerns over the Shoaib case could spill over into other bilateral areas, and noted Representative Kirk's linking this case to his support of the TRADE act. MFA DG Islam interjected that the GOB cannot interfere in the Shoaib case now that the judicial process is underway.

9.(C) The Ambassador conveyed strong concerns that the Home Ministry had not shared threat information from Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh against USG targets with us. She stressed that no matter how dubious the information appears, and in this case the press story that reported the threat had been largely substantiated, it is critical that such

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information be shared with us in a timely manner. Chowdhury took the point.

VISA ISSUES

¶10. (C) Asked about the visa regime implemented in late 2006 that requires Americans and other foreigners to register with police on arrival and departure, Chowdhury said that the MFA and the Home Ministry have resolved the visa validity issue and that Americans are again receiving visas valid for one year. DG Islam posited that two possible solutions remained on the registration issue: the GOB could revert to the previous practice for Americans of no entry/exit registration requirement or establishing a police desk at the airport for such registrations. He said that Americans should be required to register as the USG required Bangladeshis to register. The Ambassador insisted that the registration desk option was not acceptable, and believed Islam to be mistaken. We will report septel on this issue.

SAARC

¶11. (C) Asked about Bangladesh's SAARC agenda, Chowdhury said that they would focus on a number of proposals to create: a SAARC University with multiple campuses; a South Asian development fund; and a model SAARC village. While Bangladesh will also pursue bilateral issues with its SAARC partners, "We don't want the Indians to take advantage of this multilateral forum for its exclusive bilateral purposes. We want improved relations to continue, but gradually."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) In February, Chowdhury suggested that elections might occur in November 2007. Now, while his timeframes and sequencing of events remain vague, he is indicating the earliest date for elections is late 2008. This is consistent

with what we are hearing from the military.
BUTENIS